

Building Types and Styles

This section provides a brief overview of various architectural styles and building types found in the Houston Street area. However, the list is not exhaustive. Certain architectural styles, or combinations thereof, may exist that are not included.

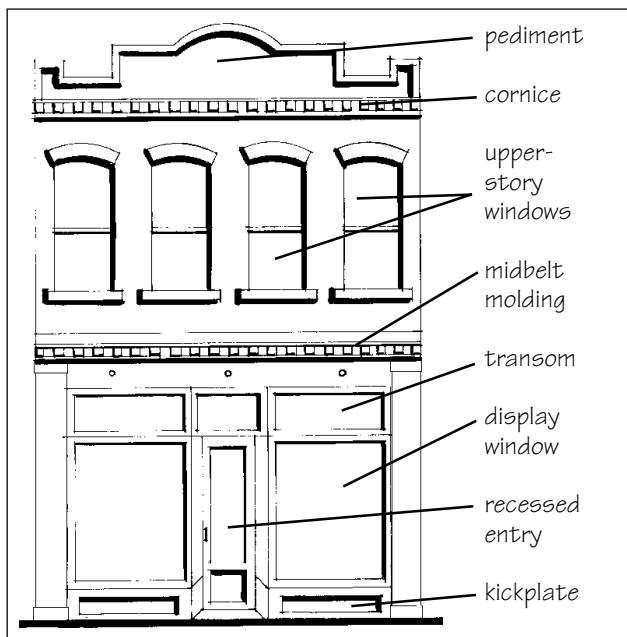
There are clear examples in the neighborhood of Italianate, Art Deco and Neoclassical Revival structures. A common practice, however, was building in the “vernacular.” These simple structures closely reflect traditions of building in their respective periods of construction and were sometimes decorated with features that come from a variety of styles.

Commercial Building Types

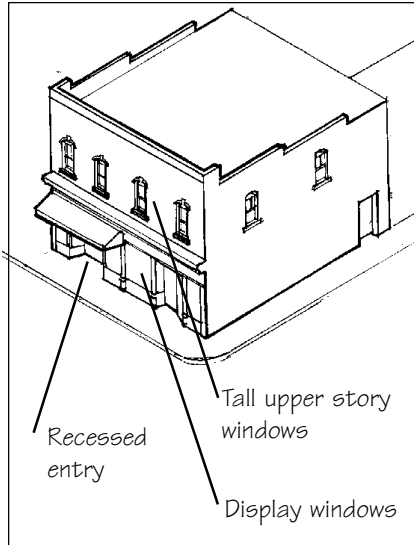
Most buildings in the Houston Street Area are variations on the traditional American commercial storefront. These buildings were designed for retail-related functions on the ground level, and therefore relatively large openings were used to maximize visibility and access to goods and services offered inside. Early structures were built to one, two or three stories. Later, this building type adapted to a taller, skyscraper structure. The front wall is typically masonry construction and built to the sidewalk edge. Upper-story windows are smaller, with vertically oriented openings. The upper floor appears more solid than transparent.



In this early commercial building the transom is divided into smaller panes of glass and the upper story windows are ganged in pairs topped with the same smaller panes of glass. The building has a central door with a small balcony overhead.



Typical commercial storefront components.



Vernacular commercial storefront.

Vernacular Commercial Storefront

• circa 1860-1920

The vernacular commercial storefront of the late 19th and early 20th centuries appears in commercial districts throughout the country, including downtown San Antonio. This building type is divided into two distinct bands. The first floor is more commonly transparent, so goods can be displayed; while the upper floor(s) are usually reserved for offices, residential and warehousing functions. At the storefront, a kickplate is found below the display window; while above, a smaller band of glass, a transom, is seen. Also, the main door is frequently recessed.

These buildings have brick or stone facades, often with stone detailing. Ornamental detail exists but is simple, and is limited to a shallow molding as a cornice. Some cornices were made of wood or masonry, while others were made of metal. Although construction of these buildings began as early as 1860 and continued until 1920, the majority were constructed at the turn-of-the century. Many carry Italianate detailing.

Characteristics

- Larger display windows
- Transom lights
- Kickplate
- Recessed entry
- Double doors
- Tall second-story windows
- Cornice



Early commercial storefronts with Italianate design influences were found on the 300 block of East Houston Street.

Italianate Style

•circa 1850-1885

Originally inspired by Renaissance buildings of Italy, this blending of classical and romantic features became one of the most popular styles in the United States. Because of its ornate details, such as bracketed cornices, this style was easily adapted to storefronts. Details and features were interpreted in wood, masonry and metal.

Characteristics

- Double-hung, narrow windows, often with rounded arch heads
- Window panes are either one-over-one or two-over-two
- Protruding window sills
- Ornate treatment of the cornice, including the use of brackets, medallions and dentil courses
- Quoins (ornamental blocks) at building corners
- Brackets, modillions and dentil courses
- Flat concealed roof



A restored vernacular commercial storefront with Italianate detailing.

Greek Revival Style

•circa 1820-1860, and later revivals

The Greek Revival style became quite popular during the middle of the nineteenth century. By 1850, it was seen in almost all settled areas in the nation. The style continued to appear in later revivals into the early twentieth century. Based on classical detailing that originated in ancient Greece, these buildings are known primarily for columns of Doric, Ionic or Corinthian orders. Other Greek Revival detailing includes classical entablatures and simple window and door surrounds consisting of transom and sidelights.

Characteristics

- Rounded columns
- Pediment roof
- Tall first-floor windows
- Entablature
- Doors with transom, side and corner lights



A deep cornice, supported on brackets, is a typical Italianate feature. (See page 44 for an historic photo of this building as the Hotel Savoy.)



Greek Revival style building on Broadway.

Neoclassical Style

•circa 1890-1920

The Neoclassical style was originally based upon interpretations of Roman models particularly in terms of order, symmetry and detail. Usually composition for formal and symmetrical features enriched by elaborate details and often emphasized by a pedimented or projecting pavilion, this style was adaptable to wood, brick and stone construction. Partially due to this, the style was popular in many regions of the country, particularly for governmental structures.

Characteristics

- Flat roof with parapet and metal or cast stone cornice
- Attic windows
- Elaborate entrance
- Keystone lintels
- Sash windows with heavy dividers or muntins
- Ornate moldings, such as dentils and modillions
- Round column with complex capitals
- Prominent center window on second story, often arched or curved



Neoclassical style building.

Art Moderne

• circa 1930-1950

Often closely related to the International Style in appearance, the Art Moderne style was devised as a way of incorporating the machine aesthetic into architecture, in the sense that buildings could emulate motion and efficiency. It is also referred to as the **Streamlined Moderne**, and always carried the aura of the futuristic. Whatever the term, in this case architecture followed industrial design, as "the slick look" was used for everything from irons to baby carriages.

Characteristics

- An asymmetrical facade, with a combination of rounded corners and angular shapes
- Use of glass block
- Use of metal sash windows with small panes, often placed at corners
- Horizontal bands, referred to as "speed bands"
- References to ocean lines, as in the use of "porthole" windows and metal railings
- Curved canopy



Alameda Theater on West Houston Street.



The Frost Building ca. 1930.



The Frost Building is mostly unchanged today.



Art Deco details of the Frost Building.

Art Deco

•circa 1930-1950

This style is related to Art Moderne in its decoration of surfaces, but in the case of Art Deco, the lines are angular rather than curvilinear. The style is most easily identified by its architectural ornament, which includes stylized floral patterns and repetitive geometric forms incorporating sharp angles and segments of circles. Zigzags, chevrons and diamond patterns are typical and often are applied as decorative moldings or are integral to masonry patterns themselves. Glass brick and rounded or angular corner windows were often used. Building entrances were embellished with decoration that extended to hardware and light fixtures.

Characteristics

- Variety of colors and textures
- Stucco and tile combined
- Projecting sunshades
- Rounded corner windows
- Colored brick or tile
- Zigzag or chevron moldings
- Molded metal panels or grills
- Stylized floral patterns
- Repetitive geometric forms



The Kress building sign enhances the cornice with a glazed terra-cotta Art Deco design.

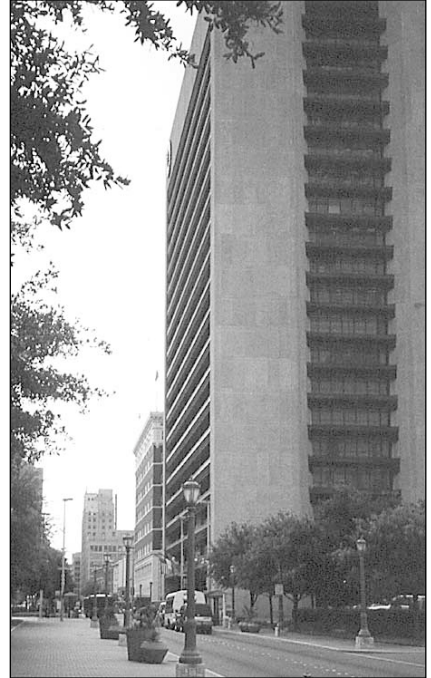
International Style

• circa 1935 - 1945, and later interpretations

Schools of architectural design in the modern age required new approaches to basic design. The elevator and the skyscraper went hand in hand. In the years after World War I, architects saw a chance to contribute to a new and better world. For architecture, this meant rejecting most conventional design standards. Structural systems were emphasized and curtain walls were designed to reflect modular compositions.

Characteristics

- Smooth wall surfaces
- Flat roof line
- Horizontal emphasis
- Horizontal bands of glass
- Minimal ornament and detail
- Glass, steel and other manufactured materials



An International Style building on West Houston Street.



High-rise with Neoclassical details.



High-rise with Italianate details.

Skyscrapers / High-rise Buildings

• circa 1890-current

While early two- and three-story buildings were supported on exterior load-bearing walls, with the advent of the skyscraper, the support system became a skeleton of iron and steel columns that permitted the load of the floors to be distributed to the columns, not the walls. The evolution of the skyscraper is realized on Houston Street. The buildings are often designed with tripartite division of a base, shaft and cap. The overall building may emphasize a vertical momentum or may resemble a series of buildings stacked upon one another. Since these structures were designed for commercial functions, the base has relatively large openings used to maximize visibility and access to goods and services offered inside. The upper floors appear more solid than transparent, often housing offices. Most are built from six to twelve stories high, although some of the later buildings rise higher. These structures often were adorned with stylistic elements such as Gothic, Italianate and Art Deco.

Characteristics

- Smooth wall surfaces
- Flat roof line
- Horizontal emphasis
- Horizontal bands of glass
- Minimal ornament and detail
- Glass, steel and other manufactured materials

The Medical Arts Building is heavily detailed with Gothic Revival ornamentation. This is realized in the upward momentum of the building, crowned by a tower with battlements, lancet windows and ornate window surrounds.



Current Character of Houston Street

The current character of Houston Street reflects many of the features seen during its early history, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, although there are a few elements that have changed. Several buildings have been altered and some new structures have appeared.

In the 1950s and 1960s, several building owners reinvested in their properties, altering storefronts in response to commercial trends in outlying shopping centers. The storefront remodels can be seen today in paneled and stuccoed facades; in some cases these remodels break up the horizontal emphasis of the building facades, undermining the architectural fabric of the street. Later, in the 1980 and 1990, a few new buildings appeared. Some of those also departed from the design traditions of the area.

While altered structures exist, many historic buildings remain intact. The key character defining elements that define Houston Street today are still those features that established it as a thriving commercial center in the past.



This historic clock adorned early Houston Street, today it continues to enhance the character of the streetscape.



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The following character defining features identified by the community are found on Houston Street today:

- **Streetscape features**
 - Variety of paving materials
 - Canopies extend to the sidewalk edge
 - Streetscape elements: trees, benches, planters & shelters
 - Human scale of the street
 - Two-way street
- **Basic building features**
 - Building fronts align at the sidewalk edge
 - Horizontal emphasis of building parts down the street; tripartite division of the skyscraper
 - Few unbuilt lots
 - Rhythm of the upper-story windows
 - Variety of building mass: both horizontal and vertical emphasis
 - Mix of building styles
 - Variety of building textures / materials
 - Variety of building heights
- **Design details**
 - Ground-floor retail storefronts: recessed entries, glass panels, transoms
 - Decorative building accents
 - Signage: projecting, blade, window and building panels
- **Design issues**
 - Covered facades
 - Vacant buildings
 - Treatment of storefronts
 - Parking lots
 - Building mass